

CHAPTER 4 Key Issues

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The identification of key issues facing the Block Island Airport and the Block Island community is an important component of the BID master plan effort. Pioneered by the FAA New England Region in the Martha's Vineyard Airport master planning effort (2000-2002), issue identification is intended to focus the planning effort and planning resources on matters of high priority to the airport and its adjacent community. At the Martha's Vineyard Airport (MVY), the master plan addressed financial and legal matters not addressed in a "traditional" master plan but of vital importance to MVY. Phase I of the master plan addressed resources to the identification of similar issues facing BID, issues which will be addressed more fully in Phase II of the master planning effort.

4.2 TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Issues identification requires the input of a broad spectrum of people with a wide range of interests and concerns. Accordingly, RIAC management solicited membership in a community-based **Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)**, whose membership is listed in Appendix D. The TAC membership is diverse and consists of town officials, a number of airport tenants, RIAC and BID management, representatives of various environmental groups, a town safety official and others.

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4.3 KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

On September 9, 2003, the first TAC meeting was held on Block Island in the Community Center. While agenda items included introductions, an outline of the master plan effort and committee administrative matters, the most important agenda topic dealt with the identification of key airport issues. The subsequent discussion centered around issues critical to the airport, its users and the Block Island community. The discussion was wide-ranging and very informative to both the study team members in attendance and the RIAC project manager.

The issues identified by the TAC members, listed in the order received, are as follows:

1. Emergency access to the island via BID (in inclement weather) for medevac purposes
2. Environmental sensitivity of airport land and environs
3. Safety, particularly substandard runway safety areas
4. Inadequate, outdated terminal
5. Electrical lighting (of airfield), aging airport infrastructure
6. Year-round on-island housing for airport employees
7. Airport/terminal security
8. Automobile parking re: revenue control, abandoned vehicles
9. Obstructions
10. Aircraft parking (lack of)
11. Location of weather station (relocate?)
12. Terminal septic system/leaching field
13. Alternative energy sources
14. Runway length

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To the credit of the RIAC and FAA managers who participated in the scoping of the consultant work effort (for budgeting and planning purposes), many of the key issues identified by the TAC were identified previously. Table 4-1 lists issues identified by the TAC members and those addressed in the contractual scope of work between RIAC and the master plan study team.

Table 4-1 Key Issues Identified by TAC vs. Issues Identified by RIAC/FAA

TAC-identified Issues	RIAC/FAA-identified Issues
Emergency access to the island via BID (in inclement weather) for medevac purposes	✓
Environmental sensitivity of airport land and environs	✓
Safety, particularly substandard runway safety areas	✓
Inadequate, outdated terminal	✓
Electrical lighting (of airfield), aging airport infrastructure	✓
Year-round on-island housing for airport employees	✓
Airport/terminal security	✓
Automobile parking re: revenue control, abandoned vehicles	✓
Obstructions	✓
Aircraft parking (lack of)	✓
Location of weather station (relocate?)	✓
Terminal septic system/leaching field	✓
Alternative energy sources	
Runway length	✓

A brief discussion of each key issue follows:

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4.3.1 Emergency Access

Every member of the TAC acknowledged the importance of a lifeline to the mainland for medical emergencies and the key role played by BID in this regard. Until the recent past, New England Airlines served as a de facto medevac provider until requested to stop because its operation did not meet the technical requirements for a medevac provider. Emergency services are now provided by several medevac companies flying properly-equipped and -staffed medevac helicopters to Block Island.

The issue raised is whether the airport is configured now or can be configured to enable medevac helicopters to land at BID in severe weather with limited visibility.

FAA Advisory Circular 150/5309-2A *Heliport Design* was examined closely in Phase II, particularly Chapter 6 Helicopter Facilities on Airports, Chapter 7 Non-precision Instrument Operations and Chapter 8 Precision Approach Operations, to determine the facility needs necessary to permit medevac helicopters to operate through BID in severe weather conditions. Chapter 5 Runway Alternatives address the issue of emergency medevac access to Block Island.

4.3.2 Environmental Sensitivity

Phase I of the BID master plan included a thorough review of airport property to define and map areas of rare/sensitive habitat and/or the presence of rare flora and fauna known to be on the airport (see Appendix E and Chapter 7). These sensitive areas were referred to constantly as Phase II moved to consider physical development within the airport boundaries.

4.3.3 Safety/Runway Safety Areas

Enhancing safety at BID is a high priority both for RIAC and FAA. As noted in Chapter 2, the Runway Safety Area (RSA) on the approach to Runway 10 is short of the required length for a so-called "standard" RSA. Alternatives were considered to provide standard runway safety areas or the maximum practicable safety area off each runway end. Alternatives considered in Phase II included, but were not limited to, filling and providing RSA of the required length and width; shifting the runway to the east and filling off the Runway 28 approach end to provide standard RSA on both runway ends; consideration of the use of structural walls to minimize impacts to adjacent wetlands; and other alternatives. Chapter 5 discusses the runway and taxiway alternatives and their related safety areas.

4.3.4 Inadequate, Outdated Terminal

RIAC acknowledges that the present terminal is in need of replacement and is committed to doing so. RIAC also is aware that the terminal houses a very popular restaurant, one of the few island restaurants open year-round.

The master plan study team included an architect, and preliminary planning for a new terminal is discussed in Chapter 6 Terminal Area Layout Alternatives.

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4.3.5 Electrical Lighting (of Airfield), Aging Airport Infrastructure

RIAC acknowledges that the basic fabric/infrastructure of the airport, particularly the pavement of Runway 10-28, is in need of overhaul. Phase II of the master plan effort includes the development of a comprehensive program of airport improvements which will identify and place a priority on which elements should be upgraded and when. This program, the **Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)** is an important planning tool and one that will be used to allocate FAA and RIAC funding 5-8 years into the future. See Chapter 8 for the scheduling and program development of the CIP.

4.3.6 Year-round Housing for Airport Manager/Employees

RIAC is interested in developing some of the airport property as a residence for the airport manager. Given the price of housing on Block Island and the salary levels of an airport manager, it is difficult for RIAC to attract and keep qualified airport managers on-island.

The airport boundaries include some land to the west of Center Road. Phase II examined whether this property (or other airport property) is suitable for the development of a residential unit(s).

4.3.7 Airport/Terminal Security

Several members of the TAC referenced issues concerning general security at the airport. The comments raised concerned more of the "garden variety" security issues, i.e., vandalism, break-ins, congregating groups for underage drinking and so on, as opposed to security issues around terrorism. Specific mention was made of a party group which frequents the areas around the MALSF approach lights which are situated in somewhat a remote area of the island (or at least one not overlooked or seen by nearby residences).

Additionally, some questioned whether the airport fell under the purview of the local police department as a state facility and wondered whether RIAC shouldn't arrange for some level of increased police presence or security at the airport.

The study team discussed the issue of security with RIAC, FAA and local officials during the early stages of Phase II. Further discussion of airport/terminal security is contained in Chapter 6.

4.3.8 Automobile Parking

RIAC charged the master plan study team not only to plan a new BID terminal but to incorporate new circulation roadways, a workable curb and optimized parking areas into the design as well. In effect, the master plan considered a total redesign of the so-called landside elements of the airport.

Specific issues addressed around auto parking (other than number of spaces and their location and layout) encompass revenue control and a means of dealing with abandoned vehicles.

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4.3.9 Obstructions

RIAC is pursuing aggressively an obstruction removal program which it has been discussing with island residents for some time. Any shifts in the runway alignment, for example, to meet runway safety area requirements may affect this program and may cause features not now considered obstructions to become obstructions.

The study team obtained a copy of the planning documents used in the obstruction removal program and assessed any physical development proposals for the airport for any impacts to the issue of obstructions around the airport.

4.3.10 Expanded Aircraft Parking

As at the Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard airports, BID receives a large influx of aircraft in the peak summer months, particularly summer weekends. Many recreational flyers, similar to the ferry day-trippers, are drawn to the island’s beauty and its many walking and biking trails offering superb water views. There also is a portion of itinerant traffic likely attracted to BID on the basis of the reputation of Bethany’s Diner. Many pilots belong to flying clubs and associations and word of a good airport restaurant quickly makes the rounds.

The summer airport staff does its best to accommodate all who come but the airport’s level parking areas – turf as well as paved areas – are severely strained in the peak periods. In such circumstances, particularly in the turf parking areas, parking clearances between aircraft become difficult to maintain, increasing chances of accidents involving aircraft, individuals or both.

The need for additional seasonal parking was assessed, and additional aircraft parking locations were identified and sized in Phase II. See Chapters 5 and 6 for additional information.

4.3.11 Location of Weather Station

The existing airport weather station, located to the east of the paved parking lot immediately adjacent to the terminal (see Figure 4-1), provides vital weather information to pilots and others. Given its location, early questions were raised as to whether it would constitute an “immoveable

object” where the terminal and/or parking would have to be sited around it or in relation to the station.

It was presumed that the weather station could indeed be relocated elsewhere on the airport and planning for the airport terminal proceeded accordingly. In the preferred terminal area layout plan (Chapter 6), the weather station remains in its present location.



Figure 4-1 AWOS Weather Station

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4.3.12 Septic System/Leaching Field

The same question was raised regarding the existing septic system/leaching field. In subsequently planning efforts, the study team assumed that the septic system could be relocated elsewhere on the airport and comply with all requirements for leaching area, setbacks and the like.

The study team examined the plans of this facility to determine the age of construction, the nature of the construction, whether, if appropriate, it can accommodate additional flows from a new terminal and related uses and so on. Additional information is provided in Chapter 6.

4.3.13 Alternative Energy Sources

The issue of Sustainable Design was considered as concepts for the new terminal building were developed, and the future design process for the proposed new airport terminal will consider “green” architecture and alternative energy sources to the extent practicable. RIAC managers had been considering alternative fuel sources for the airport as electricity rates on Block Island are among the highest in the nation. RIAC has discussed a wind turbine at the airport, but an on-island moratorium has made this possibility somewhat remote.

However, RIAC is committed to the concepts of Sustainable Design and all that it entails: recycled materials; design measures and systems which utilize renewable resources and/or limit the use of natural resources; and alternative energy sources where practical. While the design of the terminal did not take place in this master plan, care was taken to ensure that the terminal planning/siting effort did not preclude any future Sustainable Design element.

4.3.14 Runway Length

The issue of runway length came up towards the end of the September 9 TAC meeting. At 2,501 feet long, Runway 10-28 is the shortest runway in the six-airport state airport system. Several of the pilots on the TAC noted additional runway length afforded a safety margin for pilots, particularly when landing or taking off in poor weather. Other TAC members wondered whether additional length was really needed or necessary and whether it would serve to attract more aircraft and greater sizes of aircraft.

RIAC has addressed this issue at length in deliberations regarding the Rhode Island Aviation System Plan Update (ASPU) now nearing completion. RIAC managers are of the opinion that the present runway length is adequate for the aircraft which utilize BID now and into the foreseeable future; that extending the runway may result in environmental impacts too significant to avoid, minimize or mitigate; and that safety may actually be compromised – not enhanced – by a runway extension.

Regarding safety, extending the runway without a full parallel taxiway would increase back-taxiing on the runway. Back-taxiing, which essentially entails use of the runway as a taxiway, would increase significantly the chance of a runway incursion. Any airfield development that increased the risk of an incursion would run directly counter to a major goal, objective and program of the FAA: lowering runway incursions at all U.S. airports.

Accordingly, RIAC commits to the maintenance and upgrade of the existing runway of 2,501 feet, and to the consideration of providing the necessary navigation equipment and lighting necessary to reduce visibility minimums at BID for medevac helicopters.